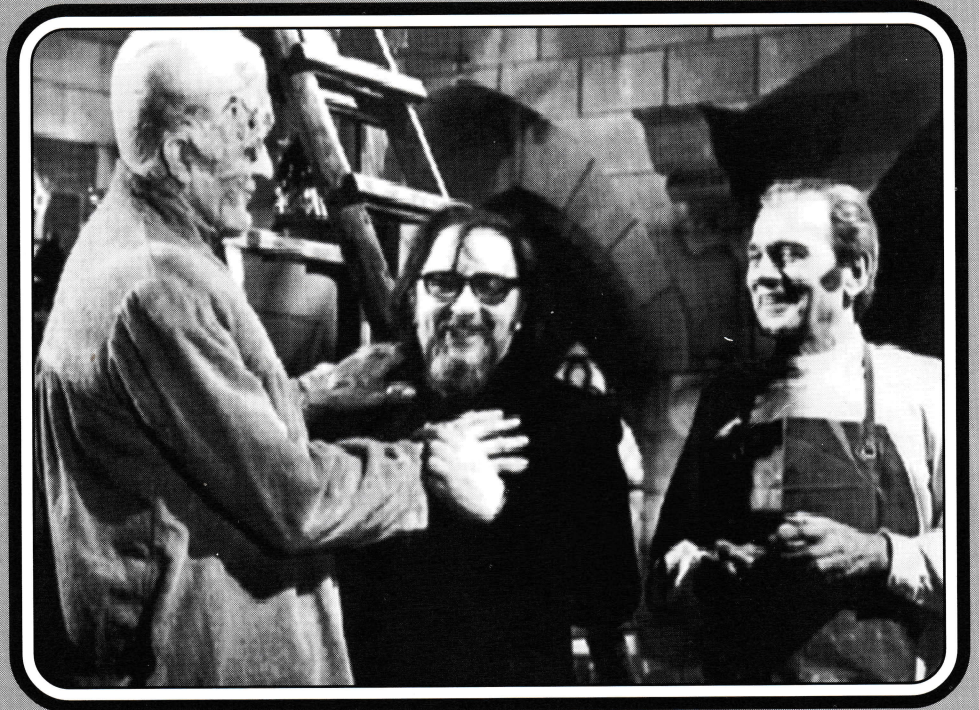


Father of LADY FRANKENSTEIN



Mel Welles Interviewed

By Tim Lucas

B***BEST REMEMBERED** for his work with Roger Corman—including **ATTACK OF THE CRAB MONSTERS** (1957), **THE UNDEAD** (1957), and **LITTLE SHOP OF HORRORS** (1960, in which he originated the role of Gravis Mushnik)—Mel Welles had put in considerable time as a working actor before making his mark in the realms of horror and science fiction. On radio, he had appeared on such classic programs as *THE SHADOW*, *THE GREEN HORNET* and *THE LUX**

RADIO THEATRE, and his TV work has encompassed everything from *YOU ARE THERE* and *PETER GUNN* to *THE LONE RANGER* and *CIRCUS BOY*. In 1957, he also directed his first feature, **CODE OF SILENCE** (aka **KILLER'S CAGE**), an independent noir thriller starring Ed Nelson

Director Mel Welles on the set at De Paolis Studios with Joseph Cotten and their Creature (Pietro Martinovich)

and Bruno ve Sota. In 1961, eager to make more feature films, he relocated with his wife and two children to Italy.

In Rome, Welles found an abundance of work, not only as an actor and script doctor, but also as a voice actor and dubbing director. Among the many Eurohorror classics dubbed into English by Mel Welles are **THE HORRIBLE DR. HICHCOCK** (1962), **CASTLE OF THE LIVING DEAD** (1964), **THE SHE BEAST** (1966), **HATCHET FOR THE HONEYMOON** (1969) and **DEEP RED** (1974). A lifelong devotee of the cinema macabre, Welles directed his first horror picture in 1967, the memorable Spanish/Italian/German co-production **ISLAND OF THE DOOMED** [*La isla de la muerte*], aka **MANEATER OF HYDRA**, starring Cameron Mitchell, Kai Fischer, and a sanguinivorous tree that made Audrey II look positively demure by comparison. His next horror film, 1971's **LADY FRANKENSTEIN**, is his best-known work in the genre.

In more recent years, Mel has done additional work in dubbing (the amusing Japanese import series **SPECTREMAN** is a highlight for genre fans), and he has also branched out into executive education, designing seminars and workshops on the theme of Effectiveness. He is currently associated with The Center for Executive Re-Invention of Austin, Texas, which has done notable work for senior executives of various **FORTUNE 500** companies. Today, a veteran of (by his own count) 65 films and 350 television series, Mel Welles maintains his own website—www.melwelles.com—where he regularly answers fans' questions, sells autographed memorabilia, and reports on his current projects.

This is an excerpt from a somewhat longer interview that was conducted by telephone on June 7, 2001, with some other areas filled in by e-mail in the days preceding, and the weeks following, that occasion. —TL



The first thing I'd like to know is—how did you end up working in Europe?

Well, the Italians have a saying, "*per inerzia*," which means "by inertia." That's the way life is; life happens in spite of you, rather than because of you. I graduated from college as a doctor of psychology, got bored with it and became a writer, and then someone asked me to act. I was good at it, but didn't find it terribly fulfilling, so I decided to direct... but in order to direct, I had to

become a producer to hire myself as a director! I left America for Europe because, at that time, television had cut into the movie business by about 40 percent, and I got tired of working at places like Screen Gems. In Europe, they were still making feature films. I bought a short story from **PLAYBOY** magazine called "The Skindiver and the Lady," and I made a deal with some German producers to produce it for me while I directed it; in return, I would direct one of their pictures, which was called **MAID FROM NYMPHENBURG**. None of those pictures ever got made, but that's how I got to Europe.

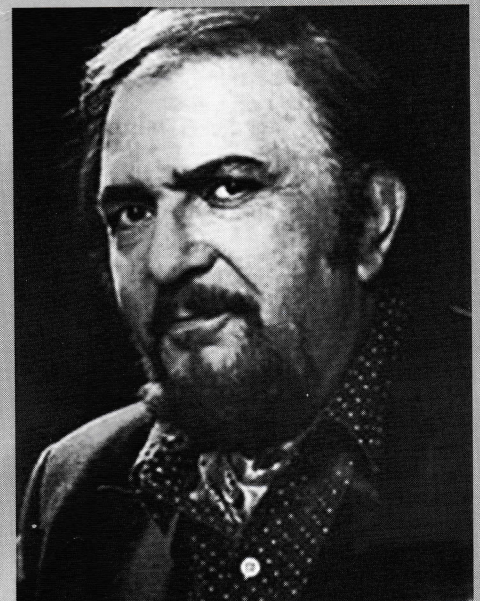
Your website lists your filmographies as a TV and film actor, but there's no information posted about the considerable number of films that you dubbed, as a voice actor and as a dubbing director.

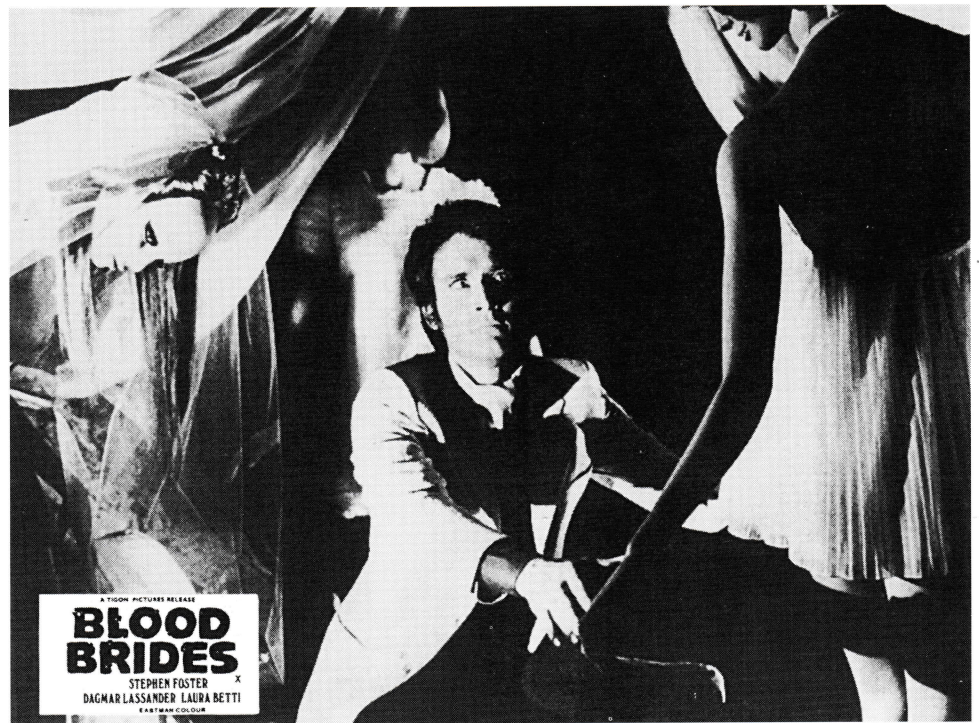
I don't have a list.

Well, let's see what we can find out. When did you first start working as a voice actor?

It must have been '61. When I first got to Rome, I was asked to dub a picture called **THE BEST OF ENEMIES** [*I due nemici*, 1961], as an actor. I dubbed every actor in the picture except for Alberto Sordi and two Africans. A bit later, they did a picture called **BARABBAS** [1962]. The director, Richard Fleischer, was going to take the film out of

You would buy maybe flowers from this man?





Mel Welles directed the English dubbing of Mario Bava's *HATCHET FOR THE HONEYMOON*, starring Stephen Forsyth—who was dubbed by American voice actor Rod Dana.

Italy to England or America to dub, but in order to satisfy Dino De Laurentiis, he agreed to audition a few of us [dubbing actors]. I ended up doing twenty-something voices for the picture, different characters. In the scene with the thieves, I talk to myself; I played two of the three thieves. Dan Sturkey did an equal number of voices, so between us, it was possible to do the entire job in Rome. After those pictures, I tied up with a fellow named Renato Caldonazzo, dubbing pictures for America, and I did a lot of work for him. One picture that I remember getting released in America was called *LYCANTHROPY*...

WEREWOLF IN A GIRL'S DORMITORY.

(CHUCKLES) Is that what they called it over here? I liked that movie, and I liked dubbing it. But sometimes it was more fun making those films than it was to watch them!

You mentioned another actor named Dan Sturkey. Could you tell me some roles he might

have dubbed, to help me pinpoint his voice?

No, it's been too many years. Dan Sturkey dubbed a lot of parts, a lot of leading men; I wish I could turn you over to him, but he died a few years ago. He died young, actually, in his 50s.

Do you remember the first horror film you dubbed?

The first horror picture I dubbed was for an Italian director. Not Mario Bava—maybe you can help me, I can't remember his name.

What was the name of the picture?

DR. HICHOCK?

Okay, that's THE HORRIBLE DR. HICHOCK, directed by Riccardo Freda.

Freda! Yeah! That was the first one. It was about necrophilia.

You dubbed a number of Mario Bava films. For example, do you remember the actor

who dubbed Stephen Forsyth in *HATCHET FOR THE HONEYMOON*? He also dubbed Mickey Hargitay in *LADY FRANKENSTEIN*.

Rod Dana. He was one of our best dubbers. Ray Evans did the voice of the assistant in **LADY FRANKENSTEIN**, the one played by Paul Muller. He was a wonderful actor, Ray. A black actor, but his voice fit Muller perfectly.

You did the voice of the inspector in *HATCHET*, I can tell.

Yes, and I also did the voice of the gravedigger played by Herbert Fux in **LADY FRANKENSTEIN**. Speaking of **HATCHET FOR THE HONEYMOON**, I dubbed most of Mario Bava's pictures. Gene Luotto did one or two, and I think I dubbed the rest. The two I remember most warmly were **BLOOD AND BLACK LACE** and **HATCHET FOR THE HONEYMOON**.

Now that's curious—because the version of *BLOOD AND BLACK LACE* that's always been in circulation is credited to somebody named Lou Moss, and nearly all the male voices were done by Paul Frees.

Then they must have done another English version. That was actually done a lot, especially after a director had "made it," they would sometimes try to make a picture attractive to more markets by redubbing it. In my version of the picture, Cameron dubbed himself.

Really? Well, I hope it turns up someday!

They must have not liked the dubbing or something and redubbed it. In the film business, everybody has an opinion.

I'll tell you a story: Lina Wertmuller once directed a picture called **CAMORRA** [1986], and they wanted me to dub it for Cannon, the Golan/Globus organization. Lina, you know, is one of the greatest directors of all time and I wanted it to be good, but Menahem Golan told me that he wanted me to dub it with Italian accents. I told him, "That's stupid, Menahem, because for all intents and purposes, they're speaking to each other in their own language. The only person in the movie who really warrants an accent is Harvey Keitel, because he's an American in Italy!" But Menahem insisted, saying "Just a flavor." But you can't dub a film with "just a flavor" of an accent and have it be readily identifiable as any kind of accent. It could be *any* accent. But anyway, I did what they wanted, and dubbed the picture with accents, and it was given a first-class dub too, because it was a first-class picture. But I went on the record at the time

as objecting to it, and later, when it was sent back to Rome, to John Thompson and Lina Wertmuller, they hated it too!

The point I'm making is, everyone in this business has an opinion of what's good and what's not good, and I know that. I was the first guy to dub an Italian Western with real Western accent, but the producers always wanted it mid-Atlantic. The first two movies I did with the actors sounding like real cowboys, were later redubbed with what was then the standard, acceptable accent.

One of the acting highlights of your career in Italy was a picture called *THE SHE BEAST*, the first film directed by Michael Reeves. Did I read somewhere that you and Charles Griffith, the screenwriter, were invited to co-direct with Reeves?

If you did, I was misquoted. I've never claimed that we were invited to co-direct that picture. The truth is that Paul Maslansky, who was a friend and for whom I'd done all the dubbing on his first film, **CASTLE OF THE LIVING DEAD**, asked me to play "watchdog" so that Michael, who was directing his first [picture], would not do shots that were uncuttable, continuity-wise. I consulted with him on a few unworkable shots, showed him the use of an extremely long lens in the shot where my son Kevin was running away from the Witch, and devised the "hammer and sickle" shot on the spur-of-the-moment when we were shooting in the church.

That's actually my favorite moment in the picture, and it's certainly one of the most discussed whenever the film is mentioned. How did it come about?

The hammer was lying there on the ground and, being an old Trotskyist, I couldn't escape the idea that the sickle, idly thrown, might be a bit of amusing irony. Remember, when Chuck wrote the script, he was commissioned by Maslansky to write a "Mack Sennett" type of farcical horror-comedy. Then, when he brought Michael aboard, they decided to abandon that idea. The result, as you probably noticed, was a thoroughly mixed bag. Frankly, the only thing I liked about that picture was the fun we had doing it, getting to be close to the wonderful Barbara Steele, and knowing the likes of a young man like Reeves. Also, the part I played was *really* my cup of tea! But yes, the shot was mine!

The following year, when you made *ISLAND OF THE DOOMED* in Spain, did you experience



any censorship problems? Did you have to shoot any scenes two different ways?

No, not at all. The reviews of **ISLAND OF THE DOOMED** in the Spanish papers called it "*la película mas sangrienta del mundo*"—the bloodiest film in the world.

I must say, it seemed that way to me, too, when I first saw it. At the end of the picture, it looks at times like it's literally raining blood!

That whole ending had to be changed; that's the greatest anecdote of my career!

Tell me.

The way the ending was written, was that the Baron goes out, in his madness, to his tree at the beginning of the storm, and the lightning hits the tree and sets it on fire; as the blossoms begin to descend and attach onto him and suck his blood out, the whole tree—and him!—begin to burn up.

The head of the Spanish effects team was a little guy, about five foot one, a little tubby guy

named Diaz. He had three partners. I gave them \$35,000 to build a tree that could be operated electronically, with a man also inside of it to manipulate the branches, for the blossoms to open, and all that. The tree never worked. All of the Baron's plants, those porcupine plants that fired their quills... nothing worked! In the case of the tree, we had to resort to invisible wires. But the effect at the end was different. I explained to them how I wanted them to do it: "You put the trigger in a groove of the tree, and you fill the groove with magnesium powder... napalm-type stuff. When the lightning is supposed to hit, you pull the trigger, and it will ignite the powder, moving up the tree like a lightning streak, creating the fire." Magnesium powder. "Don't worry about it," they said. "We'll take care of it." For ten days, I nagged them every day. Now it's 3:00 in the morning, Monday morning; we had worked all night to finish the picture. This is going to be the last shot of the picture, because the tree is gonna go up in flames, right? Diaz and his partners come out wearing long faces. "What's wrong?" They realized

that what they had bought was not two kilos of magnesium powder, but two kilos of *magnesium salt*—enough laxative to make the entire company *shit* for a year! But not enough to raise so much as a spark on the tree! So the whole ending had to change.

(LAUGHS) That's priceless! Well, it all worked out for the best...

It was the first film ever made in three weeks in Spain. My first Spanish producer opted out because he said a three-week schedule was impossible; he had never made a picture in under six weeks!

What was Cameron Mitchell like to work with?

Terrible. He was an okay guy; I had known him a few years before that, when he played in *DEATH OF A SALESMAN* on Broadway. But he had such a big ego, and he was on a health kick at the time, in which he ate 26 cloves of raw garlic every day! It would come out of his pores. That wonderful vintage car in the movie was my car, and whenever he got into it with Jorge Martín, to drive, Martín was a little taller, so Cameron would sit on something to look a little taller! So that was a drag. He was a drag. He was having problems, too, at the time with the IRS. That's why he was working in Europe; the IRS wouldn't let him keep any money. Everything he would ever earn, they would grab. This way, he could keep whatever he earned, which wasn't as much as he could have earned in the States, but he would be treated like a star and his money could go into a Swiss account. He got himself straight and went back and settled up with the IRS, and lived happily ever after. You know, Mario Bava recommended him to me for that part.

What did Bava tell you, in recommending him?

"Good actor." And he *was* a good actor.

Speaking of good actors, you had the good fortune to work with Joseph Cotten on *LADY FRANKENSTEIN*. How did that project come together?

There was a guy living in Rome named Harry Cushing III. He was from a very wealthy New York family; his mother was a Vanderbilt, and his father was a member of the Cushing family, who were the first owners of the New York Yankees. Harry came to me with an independent filmmaker's dream. He came to me with a script called *LADY*

DRACULA, which was a modern script about a vampire who worked in a funeral parlor. Harry said, "Here, I'm gonna give you the money to do this, but you've got to star Rosalba Neri in it," because he was *pursuing* her. She was turning him down, everywhere. She actually couldn't stand him; Harry was actually quite good-looking, but he was a pain in the neck because he had never lived in the real world—and that's what she resented about him. He never worked a day in his life. So here, in my lap, he dropped the script and the money to do it. What a windfall!

I worked on it, I got everything organized, I got people under contract, I booked the De Paolis Studios—and suddenly I discovered that Harry didn't own the script! The guy who owned the script, Brad Harris, was one of those Maciste/Heracles guys, and he wanted to make it himself, so he didn't want to sell it. We were stuck! So I got on a plane and flew to England, where my friend Eddie Di Lorenzo and I knocked out a script called *LADY FRANKENSTEIN* in three weeks. I came back and made a deal with Skip Steloff of Heritage Films, because Harry gave me only so much money; the rest was to come in a letter of credit from Skip. I got the letter of credit and it had a few... "tricky dicky" things in it, so it wasn't dis-countable and I was stuck again. By this time, I had 126 people working and the studio booked, you know?

So I got on the plane again and flew West to visit my old friend Roger Corman. I said, "You've got to bail me out." He was fascinated because I had signed Joseph Cotten to do the picture, which gave it a little prestige. So Roger gave me a letter of credit and I was able to proceed with the picture.

Cotten had just made *THE ABOMINABLE DR. PHIBES*, if I'm not mistaken.

Yes, he had already done *DR. PHIBES*, which is what gave me the idea that he might be available to work in my picture. He was also Vincent Price's best friend. He told me that Vincent gave him some advice about acting in horror pictures. He told him never to play it tongue-in-cheek!

I'm very impressed by certain aspects of *LADY FRANKENSTEIN*, because you pull off some grace notes that are pretty memorable. You have the characters expressing tender sentiments, doing real stuff that you don't often see characters do in horror films.

There's a lot you can say about horror films: they gave birth to the first extreme close-up; you

can do outrageous things and take risks in these films that you can't take in other kinds of pictures. But one thing I always missed in them was just this—the poignant moments, the tender moments. You might think that the people that populated those kinds of pictures were devoid of such feelings.

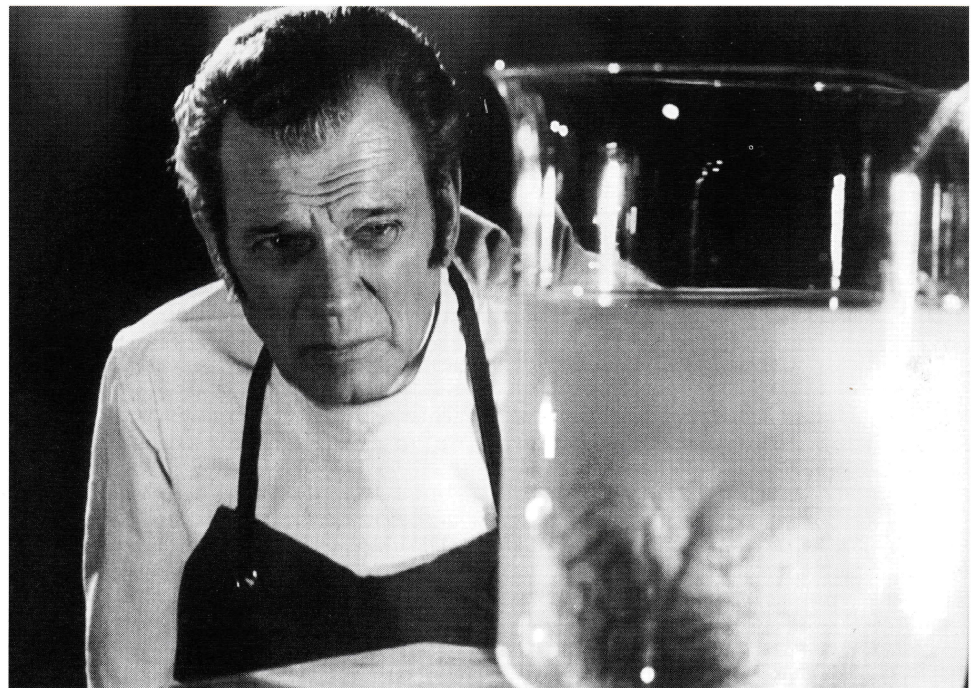
Another of my pet peeves about these films was always, "Where is the light coming from when you see the doctors performing their operations?" I designed the light you see in the film myself, just to answer that question. My other pet peeve was "Where does the electricity come from?" From the time I was nine years old, this bothered me! I can remember going to see a picture with Lionel Atwill and he was performing all of these delicate operations in the early 1800s, and there was all this light on the operating table... and yet when they were walking around the town, all you saw were torches and gaslights everywhere! I used to argue about it with my little friends. I'd look at those ladders with the electricity climbing up, and I'd say, "Where did they get the electricity

from?" They'd say, "It came from the lightning." I'd say, "No, no. The lightning is what gives the monster life." But before that, we see all this electricity already harnessed in the laboratory! Where does *that* come from?

So you were cursed, early on, with a logical mind.

The best thing I did in that picture... In Spain and Italy, at that time, you couldn't find a good special effects man anywhere. The guys I used on **LADY FRANKENSTEIN**, there was one thing I really wanted them to have ready... Because of the bad experience I'd had in Spain on **ISLAND OF THE DOOMED**, I was very nervous about it. So I kept after them about this one shot, where Rosalba was supposed to put the probes into the large beaker with the brain in it, causing all kinds of sparks to fly out. I kept telling them, "We're shooting it on Thursday morning. At 8:00 Thursday morning, I want everything ready." On Wednesday night, they came to me and said "You can't shoot it tomorrow morning." "Why not?" "Because we need more time

Joseph Cotten keeps watch on a brain built by future Oscar-winner Carlo Rambaldi in LADY FRANKENSTEIN.





Rosalba Neri uses only the most authentic and historically accurate mad doctor equipment, thanks to her vigilant director.

to get ready, and we need \$300 more to get all the stuff." I said, "Forget about it."

I went out to one of the government-controlled tobacco stores over there—where you could buy cigarettes and cigars, and also the few fireworks that are openly sold in Rome—sparklers, pinwheels, that kind of thing. I bought half a dozen pinwheels and I came into the set and told them, "Here's what you do: you rig these on a bar across a beaker within the beaker, a smaller beaker inside the larger one... and you fix this with a spark-starter and a blip-switch." The effect cost \$1.80 and it worked fine!

I noticed that LADY FRANKENSTEIN contains some of the same set pieces—walls, staircases, and so on—that later appeared in the Andy Warhol Frankenstein picture, which was also shot at De Paolis Studios.

De Paolis was the oldest studio in Rome. They used to have period dungeon and cave and book-case pieces that were kept standing there, because there were so many pictures made that needed things like that. A lot of the interiors we

used were at a real castle—the fireplace scenes, all that. Every time the Inspector, Hargitay, came to call—we didn't shoot any of his stuff in the studio.

When I discovered the Swedish tape of LADY FRANKENSTEIN, I was astonished by how much was cut from the American version of the picture. Can you shed any light on why the cuts were made?

I can't tell you much about Corman's cuts as they never—in his latter career as producer/distributor—seemed to have any real logic. He never believed in taking any time to develop insights, character traits, subtleties. Since he bailed me out of a failed deal with Skip Steloff, he had all rights to do whatever he wanted. Most Cormanites suffered the major frustration of Roger's slashing of pictures because they took "too much time to get to the action" or were "too slow," or whatever. Chuck Griffith almost went mad with grief over what was done to his scripts and his directed-films. That's why most people moved on, having learned what *not* to do in making a movie. 🐾